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# The two faces of the CIA

## — good and bad

By Stanley Karnow

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Central Intelligence Agency has been in the headlines these days, and the stories point up how the organization can be effectively used and egregiously misused.

On the one hand, there was the ghastly bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut, which cost the lives of Robert Ames, a senior CIA analyst on the Middle East, and a number of his colleagues. Ames was a Philadelphia native.

At the same time, there have been revelations about the CIA's covert activities in Central America, where its agents are running clandestine operations designed to exert pressure on the left-wing regime in Nicaragua.

As a former foreign correspondent, I have had occasion over the years to deal with both the CIA's experts and its military activists, and the experience has taught me not to look at the organization as a monolith.

The intelligence specialists, whose job it is to assess political, economic, social and scientific developments abroad, tend to be balanced, dispassionate scholars, remarkably free of prejudice. Indeed, their reputations depend on their ability to call the shots realistically.

Ames, whom I did not know, evidently fit into this category. Robert E. Hunter, a former member of the National Security Council staff during the Carter administration, de-

scribed Ames the other day in the Washington Post as a superb analyst who served successive presidents with equal impartiality.

I have been acquainted with similar CIA officials in many parts of the world — men and women whose familiarity with the regions they covered was unsurpassed.

During my stint in Hong Kong, for instance, some of the CIA's "China watchers" were first-rate. Often, I discovered, their estimates were based as much on instinct as on hard information, and their "feel" for the situation frequently was accurate.

Look at the record on Vietnam, and the CIA's analytical performance was generally excellent. While the generals and admirals were hyping up the statistics to glorify themselves, the agency's anonymous people usually played it cool.

Small wonder that Richard Nixon disdained the CIA's political officers, deriding them as "liberals" who refused to tell him what he wanted to hear. Other presidents suffered from the same lack of trust in the agency when it failed to conform to their policies.

That is why the CIA's intelligence professionals can be so good. Their responsibility is not to make policy or to endorse policies, but to furnish the raw material out of which policies are shaped.

The other side of the coin, however, is the CIA's operational division, the guys out of *Smiley's People* and other such novels, who are assigned to topple foreign leaders and knock over undesirable foreign governments.

These are the soldiers of fortune and the undercover figures. They are not in business for themselves. They follow orders. But the fact that they exist creates strange and often unprofitable temptations for the men in the White House.

Presidents never instruct the cloak-and-dagger types to engage in "dirty tricks." On the contrary, the president is absolved of any involve-

ment in such nastiness under the so-called "theory of plausible denial," which he can summon up to plead ignorance.

He has only to let it be known, however, that he would like to see the end of some obstreperous foreign figure, and these CIA operatives go into action. They have the "assets," as the technical term for their abilities is put.

The investigation into the CIA's assassination activities, conducted by a Senate committee a few years ago, disclosed the extent of the agency's involvement in such "dirty tricks."

Much of it read like science fiction. Among other things, there were plans to bump off Fidel Castro with a gift of exploding cigars or embarrass him by infiltrating a depilatory that would make his beard fall out.

The CIA's counterinsurgency efforts in Central America seem to me to be on the wrong track, though they are not as silly as debearding Castro. But Americans, judging from the record, are just not very good at interfering in the affairs of other countries.

It may be that "our" guerrillas can succeed in eliminating "their" guerrillas. That is no guarantee, though, that the American-sponsored regime will be any better for the people of the country in question than the regime it supplants.

By all means, then, the CIA must be supported as an organization that gathers and appraises intelligence. But as an instrument for intervention overseas, it is an unhealthy and often dangerous weapon.